



This controversial painting of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, depicting the moment when the U.S. government secured a huge tract of Native American land in 1851, hangs in the Governor's Reception Room at the Capitol. (Submitted image)

Minnesota's historical palette

By: Chris Steller December 2, 2015 0

A state panel tackling the question of what art should be on display at the State Capitol is getting an earful from Minnesotans.

The Art Subcommittee of the Minnesota State Capitol Preservation Commission is in the thick of a series of meetings to gather public input around the state that have drawn 20 to 50 people at each stop. (There is also an online survey that has so far collected more than 1,400 responses.)

"The Capitol is the people's house," Rep. Diane Loeffler, DFL-Minneapolis, reminded about 20 people at a public input meeting Tuesday at Hamline University in St. Paul. "Many people believe [the Capitol's current] art is valuable for its artistic quality and the stories that it tells because it's been part of the history of this very special building. But it may not reflect Minnesota of today. It's Minnesota of 1905." And, she added in an interview, young visitors often aren't equipped to interpret what they see, not having been taught as much about state history as earlier generations of children were.

Loeffler, Sen. David Senjem, R-Rochester, and former state Supreme Court Justice Paul H. Anderson, are subcommittee co-chairs (or "tri-chairs").

A top concern is the depiction of Native Americans and historical events in paintings deemed "insensitive." That includes the mural-sized painting of the signing of the Treaty of Traverse des Sioux, when the U.S. government secured a huge tract of Native American land in 1851, that dominates a main wall in the governor's reception room.

At the St. Paul meeting Tuesday, volunteers with a group called Healing Minnesota Stories advocated removing "offensive, traumatizing paintings."

"How we deal with the insensitive art will be the gauge by which our committee is measured," said Senjem, who led recent public meetings in Rochester and Mankato. He said he also heard from veterans who wanted Civil War battle-scene art to remain on view, as well as people in the Mankato area who felt depictions of the Dakota Conflict of 1862 were important.

"We're fully cognizant of the challenges of what's there," said subcommittee member D. Stephen Elliott, director of the Minnesota Historical Society. "The more eyes on it, the better."

Anderson facilitated the Bemidji session with subcommittee member Anton Treuer, a professor at Bemidji State University. Former Red Lake Tribal Secretary Kathryn "Jodi" Beaulieu and Rep. John Persell, DFL-Bemidji, attended the session, according to Treuer, who said the event was an "excellent discussion that used all of the allotted time."

Other questions facing the subcommittee include how to display and interpret governors' portraits and what kind of new art might fill roughly 40,000 square feet opened up by the Capitol renovation work.

Capitol Report got input about the current state of the process from the panel's tri-chairs in interviews (and also, in Loeffler's case, from her St. Paul presentation), as well as from Treuer (in an email, edited for length).

Sen. David Senjem

We've had Native American input that we need to think about this a little bit deeper from the standpoint of insensitivities and things which are concerning to their culture. How do we deal with that? That will in the end be the measure of our success or failure. ... Can we do it in a satisfactory manner? For some, to remove [insensitive art], that will be an unsatisfactory answer. For others, to leave it in will be unsatisfactory. So where is the middle



In this March 2014 photo, a painting by Douglas Volk depicts "Father Hennepin Discovers St. Anthony Falls" in the Governor's Reception Room at the Capitol in St. Paul. A top concern among members of a Capitol artwork panel is the depiction of Native Americans and historical events in paintings deemed "insensitive." (AP file photo: Jim Mone)

ground on this one? Finding that middle ground, I think, will be the test of the committee.

Former Justice Paul Anderson

We’re not going to do something that’s just knee-jerk politically correct. We’re going to be very deliberate and rational. We got some people who want to keep politics out of it. That’s hard to do in a sense. It already raises heads a little bit. ... We’re going to strive mightily. There are going to be people who want to make it political, and they’re spring-loaded. But we’re going to try to do it in a way that can minimize it. Because it is truly, truly a bipartisan effort.

Rep. Diane Loeffler

We will be providing preliminary recommendations to the preservation commission of our Phase 1 report at the end of January. That will focus primarily on the current art and the preservation process that is going on right now. And then in Phase 2 we will talk more about what goes where [and] if new stories are to be told, what’s the construct of that and who selects it?

There are 148 pieces of artwork in the Capitol. ... Most of our art dates back to 1905 when our Capitol was first opened. And at that time Minnesota was seen as really having made its mark on history as being the heroes of the Civil War. And so a lot of the original early art in a lot of places in the Capitol really focuses on that.

I like to remind people that even though our population’s racial and ethnic makeup has changed, we’ve always had about 50 percent women. But there’s less than a handful of real women who have ever lived in Minnesota who are in any way featured in those 148 pieces of art.

Dr. Anton Treuer

There seemed to be consensus at that [Bemidji] meeting that:

Paintings in canvas with the canvas attached to walls should be removed from the walls and placed in movable frames to enable us and future generations to shuffle them around as the will of the people and political process allows.

The very auspicious location, immediately behind the governor at most major press conferences, which is currently occupied by a controversial romanticization of the Treaty of Traverse Des Sioux, should be occupied by something that is welcoming to all Minnesotans not just some Minnesotans. At least three-fourths of the Bemidji participants thought that moving it out of the Capitol to the Minnesota Historical Society would best enable proper interpretive work and display. A couple thought that moving to a more obscure location elsewhere in the Capitol would be acceptable. If there are “gentle doses of racism” in several paintings, that should be cause for pause. One participant said, “If a fifth-grader comes to Capitol and sees a painting that gives anything other than a neutral or positive feeling, the painting belongs somewhere else.” This discussion also applied to [artworks titled] “The Punitive Expedition Against the Dakota at Killdeer Mountain,” “Father Hennepin’s Discovery of the Falls at St. Anthony,” and “The Battle of New Ulm.”

Most of the participants seemed in favor of the “Hall of Governors” idea for the governor portraits, with interpretive info, a limit on space for governor portraits, and a neutral, non-subjective rotation of the portraits in the limited space so nobody would pick the ones for display, but they would all be displayed in equal measure on a rotating basis. They also wanted more interactive interpretive stuff.

For the new space, there was a resounding call for more art that reflects the diversity of our state now and the projected diversity of our state in the future. The Capitol must be a place for all of our citizens, most of whom are not represented in the art. Also, there is no art that says, “You are in Minnesota now,” that speaks to our unique geographic space. Some participants said that the Dakota creation story, which takes place in Minnesota, should be highlighted. Others said the historical material should have less focus on war. Others said that it should represent people throughout time, that natives should be shown as more than “something that happened in the past,” but contemporary contributors to our state.

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In this March 2014 photo, the painting “The Battle of Nashville” hangs in the Governor’s Reception Room at the Capitol in St. Paul. Art depicting the Civil War is common in the Capitol, which opened four decades after that conflict. (AP file photo: Jim Mone)

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